

(East Brunswick, NJ) – U.S. Rep. Rush Holt held two town halls on May 17 and 18 to answer questions about Medicare and to defend the program as “critically important” at a time when Washington is abuzz about potential cuts.

Holt and Dr. Jaye Weisman, Regional Administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, addressed seniors' questions and concerns at a May 17 town hall at the Monroe public library and at a May 18 town hall at the East Brunswick senior center.

“Medicare is a very efficient program,” Holt told seniors in East Brunswick. “The overhead of Medicare is about two percent. The overhead in private insurance – in other words, your premium dollars that are not spent on providing health care – amounts to about 25 percent.”

Local seniors raised questions about a range of day-to-day Medicare issues, such as the program's prescription drug coverage, the difference between generic prescriptions and brand name drugs, and the so-called “donut hole” in prescription drug coverage. But the hottest topic of conversation was the federal budget recently passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, which proposes privatizing the Medicare program.

“For as long as Medicare has existed, it has been under attack,” said Holt, who opposed the budget in Congress. “It's significant that the way to deal with our federal fiscal problems, in the minds of the majority in the House of Representative, [is that] we should completely change Medicare.”

Under the proposed plan, which passed the U.S. House with only Republican support on a mostly party-line vote, Americans who are now under 55 years of age would be disqualified from traditional Medicare. They would instead receive a voucher from the federal government to buy insurance on the private insurance market. The size of the vouchers, Holt said, would not keep pace with the rising cost of health insurance. “As a result of this measure – this extreme measure,” Holt said, “out-of-pocket health care costs for seniors would double.”

Essentially, he said, the proposed budget would “end Medicare as we know it.”

Holt outlined a different vision for balancing the federal budget: “We need to invest in America. That means investing in education, investing in research, investing in infrastructure, where small businesses and medium-sized businesses can hire and grow.” As the economy grows, Holt said, federal revenues will grow as well, restoring sounder footing to programs like Medicare and Social Security.

After the forum and Q&A session, Holt and Weisman also assisted individual seniors with their personal Medicare questions.